DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 917 RC 021 471

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TITLE Identification, Differentiation and Intervention of the Demographically Diverse Four Year Old: Strategies for Rural Special Education.

PUB DATE 1998-03-00

NOTE 6p.; In: Coming Together: Preparing for Rural Special Education in the 21st Century. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (18th, Charleston, SC, March 25-28, 1998); see RC 021 434.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Problems; Black Youth; *Child Behavior; *Cultural Differences; Early Intervention; *Identification; *Play Therapy; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Rural Urban Differences; Teacher Attitudes; Urban to Rural Migration

IDENTIFIERS *African Americans

ABSTRACT

Growing migration of diverse groups from urban to rural areas increases the chance that culturally and situationally based behaviors of relocated urban children will be misinterpreted. Culturally determined behaviors may be rejected or labeled as inappropriate in an Anglo-Saxon culture and environment, leading to mislabeling of minority group children as being emotionally disturbed or having behavior problems. A study examined the behaviors of 24 African American children in a metropolitan public school program for 4-year-olds. African American children were selected due to the high probability of mislabeling and present overrepresentation in classrooms for the emotionally disturbed. A screening device was developed to differentiate between behaviors related to acceptable cultural differences and those requiring intervention. The screening measure included observational criteria for eight areas: display of emotion, relationship skills, play skills, response to authority, creative skills, responsibility, problem-solving skills, and "freedom of life." Two groups of 4-year-olds were observed daily during play time for 4 weeks. Behaviors likely to be deemed unacceptable were identified and defined as to their characteristic cultural and demographic origins. In addition, six children exhibiting age-inappropriate behaviors were selected for directive group play therapy that was sensitive to culturally determined behaviors. After 10 30-minute sessions, the children showed significant gains in age-appropriate behavior, active participation in structured activities, self-concept, and overall social skills. (SV)

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ED 417 917

# IDENTIFICATION, DIFFERENTIATION AND INTERVENTION OF THE DEMOGRAPHICALLY DIVERSE FOUR YEAR OLD, STRATEGIES FOR RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

The catalyst for this study, is the increased interest in early intervention approaches for kindergarten children who lack readiness skills for first grade. This study is necessary and important in that it expands the current focus on purely cognitive developmental domains of readiness, to include the areas of socialization and behavior of pre-school children. However, there is a high probability of misinterpretation of information in such demographic- and/or cultural-based domains.

This probability becomes of primary concern for two reasons: (1) National statistics cite recent shifts of populations from large metropolitan states and cities to rural areas, and, (2) information based on observations may lack the cultural differentiation-factor needed for effective decision-making. Behaviors, basic to learning, of preschool children that are cultural- and situation-based, are identified and acknowledged as in danger of misinterpretation.

Head Start is a federal discretionary grant program with a long history of providing comprehensive child development and support services to young children and families with incomes at or below the poverty level. The four-year program is and early childhood programs offered in addition to, rather than supplement the federally sponsored Head Start programs.

The rules and regulations, in brief, for Early Childhood Education Programs for Four-Year-Olds consists of eleven guidelines: (1) A child must be age four on or before September 1 of the ensuing school year, and shall not have attended a public school kindergarten; (2) Any teacher employed by a public school to teach in an early childhood education program shall be certified in early childhood education; (3) If a school district contracts with a private or a public provider, of early childhood education programs, other than a school district, the contract may only be continued if each teacher serving the school on and after January 1, 1993, is certified in early childhood education; (4) The number of children in a group shall not exceed twenty; (5) The school district shall ensure the teacher assistant is provided training in early childhood education; (6) A school day for a child consists of not less than two and one-half hours per session; (7) The program shall be designed to include four teaching sessions for the students and one session for implementing the parent program which includes planning, parent-teacher conferencing and development of materials; (8) The program shall establish a definite plan for implementing the parent program to support the child's education experience; (9) The learning environment shall a) be arranged in centers to provide for the individual and group learning experiences; b) be equipped with movable furniture of the correct size; c) have restroom facilities that will accommodate four-year-olds; (10) The early childhood curriculum shall be designed for four-year-olds; (11) Children who meet the qualifications for federally sponsored Head Start programs shall be entitled to attend free of charge and shall be given priority for acceptance into early childhood programs over

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children who do not meet the qualifications for the federally sponsored Head Start programs.

**Subjects:** The population used in the original study consisted of ethnically (African American) and geographically (inner-city) diverse four-year-olds, who, by the time the study began, had established residence in a rural environment. An ethnic group may be defined as an involuntary collectivity of people with a shared feeling of common identity, a sense of peoplehood, and shared sense of interdependence of fate. These findings derive, in part from a common ancestral origin, a common set of values, experiences, behavioral characteristics and linguistic traits that differ substantially from other ethnic groups within society (Banks, 1994).

The authors resolved that the original population, were subject to an overwhelming influential variable of an established rural residence. It was concluded that the students had either acquired behavior of that environment or suffered misinterpretation and mislabeling.

The study thus led in the direction of utilizing a "pre-migrant" population. A "pre-migrant" population authors define as culturally diverse, and whose present location are established in largely populated cities and areas, with "big city" behavior norms and diverse cultural norms. The National Center for Education Statistics reports a deluge migration trend, directly to rural areas. This population is without mass previous experience in rural areas, and exhibit culturally determined behaviors that may be rejected or labeled as inappropriate in an Anglo-Saxon culture and environment. The new focus of study utilized a four-year-old program in an urban school with a 99% African American population. The African American ethnic group was selected due to the high probability of mislabeling of behavioral characteristics and present overrepresentation in classrooms for the emotionally disturbed.

Twenty-four children from a metropolitan public school four-year old program were included in the study. Nine of the twenty-four children were identified as in need for intervention. Teacher nomination was solicited for confirmation that identified students may benefit from intervention.

**Method and Design:** Early screening elements vary widely and have been misleading or have failed to discriminate between behaviors that are culturally acceptable or situationally determined, or have failed to accurately predict unreadiness for formal school, due to social/emotional problems.

A screening device containing items sensitive to culture and demographic area was designed to ensure a more accurate differentiation between behaviors indicative of an acceptable cultural difference, and those that require intervention. Observational criteria are as follows: **Display of Emotion:** (the capacity to show joy, anger, sorrow, grief, enthusiasm, excitement and frustration). **Relationship Skills:** (lack of social competence, leading to playing alone, fearful of peers, or lacking confidence in self for meeting expectations of adults). **Play Skills:** (variation in play, inventive play, lacks security in play within the environment). **Response to Authority:** (general acceptance of authority, and adult demands). **Creative Skills:** (exhibits curiosity, pushes against perceived boundaries (on occasion). **Responsibility:** (becomes actively involved in activities, avoids passivity). **Problem Solving Skills:** (effectively interacts with small and large groups, admits wrong, forgives, and understands options or reaches independent solutions). **Freedom of Life:** (lacks prevailing fear that interferes with socialization, accepts new and different activities, and appreciates things and times of joy and excitement).

"Normal progression" in four-year olds has long been a comparative developmental issue with parents and educators alike. When criteria used to critique development is culturally and situationally determined, there is great danger in using a comparative approach, in that it results in inaccuracy in interpretation of behaviors. Sudden changes in a child's environment, and routine of

peer interaction, can result in a problematic dilemma that is two-fold. First is teacher expectation, due to lack of a diverse cultural exposure and experience. Secondly, children of preschool age are particularly vulnerable to inappropriate feedback and actions. Many preschoolers have a hard time coping with frequent, rapid, changes in environments. When any given school system is suddenly faced with a surge of student population that is diverse in culture and geographic origin, invalid and inaccurate perceptions of social skills and behaviors of students may occur.

Two groups of four-year-olds were observed for a four-week period of time, during the play period, each day, per group. There are twelve students in each morning and afternoon group. Ethnicity and gender distribution in the morning group, were six African American females and six African American males. The afternoon group consisted of five African American females, one White female, and six African American males. Directive group play therapy was determined as the tool of intervention.

Standards for normal behavior are generally based more on what is judged acceptable in a specific setting than on judgments about how an individual performs on a test. It is hypothesized that rural school systems may judge members of a "pre-migrant" population as demonstrating "unacceptable" behavior, which may then be the basis for being identified as behavior disordered, or a behavior problems. Behaviors observed, (utilizing "play therapy"), established within an eight-point criterion, are more likely to be identified as unacceptable. These same behaviors are defined as to their characteristic cultural and demographic origins.

**Display of Emotion:** Words used with intensity, and volume.

**Relationship Skills:** Show of belligerence, aggression or complete submission.

**Play Skills:** Utilization of toys as weapons fast paced play, high level of communication. (African American males displaying such behavior, are regarded as unruly, overly aggressive and difficult to manage, or as having hyperactive-like behavior labeled with an Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)

**Response to Authority:** Occasional resistance of adult figures, defiance in attention or disengagement and humming.

**Creative Skills:** Pries, peeks or snoops when asked to reframe, ventures without or prior to instruction, to the point of being mischievous.

**Responsibility:** High activity level, even during focused activities, continuous attempts to interact in non-programmed activities.

**Problem Solving Skills:** Attempts to control activity, or be in the spotlight. Voicing options and making commands. Expresses through behavior, a need to be "center-stage."

**Freedom of Life:** Expresses desires for play and social activities that involve a high level of activity, sound and music. Frequent show of affection through touching or hugging.

Demographics associated with each criterion, evolve through play therapy when cars were "driven" fast, and its occupants were yelling harshly to other motorist. Through dramatic play, children are constantly in "traffic jams", and expressed being "late for work". Big busses were

stopping on every corner, letting on lots of people going down town. Busses and cars were "putting out" lots of smoke.

Children spoke of "working hard" and taking care of their parents and little sister or brother. Some students made commands, and tasks were distributed to other students. Allocations were made with toys, and children talked about "going to Target, Block Buster Video, and 'the mall' to shop and going to birthday parties. A high level of activity and options of play were discussed.

**Intervention:** Play Therapy is an effective method when used to differentiate between behaviors that are culturally- or situational-based, and to identify those behaviors that are in need of intervention. While each individual case will require its own special intervention, Play Therapy is an effective means of intervention.

It should be understood that teachers, who are of a different ethnicity, living in a different demographic area than children being taught, have mutually incompatible expectations of each other. Teachers have traditionally concluded that the children are incorrigible, and the children conclude that the teachers are inconsistent and capricious. Problems seem to stem from a cultural mismatch between the teacher and the child.

Parents are at the center of a social control network. The significant feature of the control system is that it seems to operate external to the child. Therefore, the child seems to develop external locus of control, as opposed to an expected internal locus of control. One of the reasons White teachers have difficulty motivating and in disciplining African American children is the cultural dissonance that occurs when the teachers behave differently from the way the children expect authority figures to behave.

African American children enter school with excitement and enthusiasm, only to have the school crush their freedom and creativity (Hale-Benson, 1982). Children find themselves too often among unwelcoming and uncaring adults and hostile institutions and need all the developmental freedom they can muster to build muscle necessary for encountering the very white society in which they may be living. Those who are not able to build the muscle, are labeled disruptive children are prescribed medication, and are placed in "problem" classes where cognitive expectations are low, or they are suspended from school and ignored.

Although the African American culture do think and conceptualize their experience symbolically, they are a relational cultural. Haskins and Butts, 1973, suggests that intellectual analysis disconnected from feelings leads to incomplete knowledge of the world. Results of recent brain-based research reveal that "emotion drives attention, and attention derives learning and memory" (Sylwester, 1995).

African American children are exposed to a high degree of stimulation from the creative arts. They are surrounded with stimuli from the visual arts, such as posters, paintings, and graffiti, the audio arts, such as stereos, radios, and the fashion arts, such as creative hairstyles, hats, scarves, and a general orientation toward adornment of the body that grows out of the African heritage.

Some of the basic characteristics of African American children are summarized as highly affective; expresses herself or himself through considerable body language; relies on words that depend upon context for meaning; adopts a systematic use of nuances of intonation and body language, such eye movement and positioning; high sensitivity to others' nonverbal cures; seeks to be people oriented; is sociocentric; uses internal cues for problem solving; feels highly empathetic; and likes spontaneity.

Behavior of children from each group, morning and afternoon, was observed and differentiated as to those behaviors, which were situation- or cultural-bound from those in need of intervention, were identified. Three males and two females from the morning group were identified. Three children exhibiting behavior inappropriate for chronological age, (lack of social competence, playing alone and fearful of peers), two children for continuously pushing against perceived boundaries, and non-compliance of classroom rules. From the afternoon group, one female exhibiting passivity and non-acceptance of authority, three males (lacking security in play and failure to interact during play), was identified.

Teacher confirmation supported author's observation of behaviors and students identified for intervention. Three students each from the morning and afternoon group were then randomly selected, and received ten thirty-minute group therapy sessions. Knowledge and understanding of children's culturally determined behavior was considered and respected as authors proceeded with intervention utilizing directive group play therapy.

Activity periods were provided for expenditure of excess energy and appropriate brief rest periods were given to award fatigue and irritability. Techniques that incorporate body movement into the learning process were used. We were sensitive to the children's use of gestures, eye contact and other verbal cues. Children were encouraged to take conversationally and creatively; labeling, storytelling, chanting, imitation and reciting were encouraged.

Small group learning and hands on contact was made. Variations of music played during play activities. Open-ended learning materials were used; clay, socio-drama play. Games were used that encouraged playing together. Rhythm was used in speech and authors engaged in verbal interplay needed for a cultural connection with some students.

**Results:** Children who received directive group therapy made significant gains compared to children receiving no intervention. Gains were made in age appropriate behavior, percentage of time in active participation in structured activities, self-concept, and overall social skills. Teacher observation and evaluation noted significant improvement in classroom behavior, and other structured environments.

The ultimate of teachers, especially teachers of those at the beginning of their experience, is to structure the classroom environment in such a way as to provide minimal conflict and maximum opportunity for the child to manage herself or himself. Authors purpose that development of an expanded knowledge and experience in cultural and demographic diversity is necessary to assure this goal is met.

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